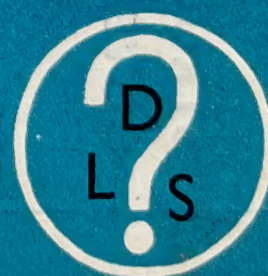




LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM

LABOUR
DISCUSSION
SERIES

NUMBER FOUR



TWOPENCE

STRUCTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT



62 ADMINISTRATIVE
COUNTIES

83 COUNTY
BOROUGHs



309 NON-COUNTY
BOROUGHs



572 URBAN
DISTRICTs

475 RURAL
DISTRICTs



7000 PARISH
COUNCILs

4100 PARISH
MEETINGS



LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IN ENGLAND AND WALES

I. WHAT IS THE SET-UP OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT ?*

In England and Wales some people live in places where there are three local authorities, some in places where there are two, and some in places where there is only one. This gives an idea of the variety and complexity of English local government. In the countryside a citizen will be concerned with a parish council, a rural district council and a county council. In more built-up areas he may have a borough or urban district council and a county council. Finally, he may live in a county borough, where there is only a borough or city council.

The parish is the oldest, the smallest and the least complicated local government area. Every parish with a population over 300 must have a parish council. Parishes with less than 300 but more than 200 people have the right to one if they ask for it; with less than 200, they may have one if they ask and the county council approves. Each parish has also a parish meeting comprising all local government electors. In larger parishes the parish meeting elects the parish council; in smaller ones where there is no council the meeting does most of the work which councils do. If either the council or the meeting so wish, the council may be elected in the same way as other authorities instead of by show of hands at the meeting. There are 7,000 parish councils in England and Wales and 4,100 parish meetings without councils.

The next level of local government is made up of non-county boroughs and urban and rural districts. The powers of a non-county borough are very much the same as those of an urban district, but it is created by a royal charter and has a mayor and aldermen. Several boroughs have populations less than 2,000, while urban districts sometimes approach 190,000. There are 309 non-county boroughs, 572 urban and 475 rural districts.

The top level is provided by counties, which comprise on the one hand municipal boroughs and urban districts, and on the other rural districts, which in their turn are made up of parishes. Administrative counties range from Middlesex, with a 1939 population of over 2,100,000, to Rutland, with under 18,000. There are 62 administrative counties, which are not always the same thing as counties that appear in a map or in the cricket

* For a general account of the structure and powers of local government see *Local Government Handbook*, 1946 (Labour Party, 1s. 3d.), which should be read in conjunction with this pamphlet.

championship. Yorkshire, for example, is split up into East, West and North Ridings, Sussex into East and West Sussex.

Inside the geographical counties, but completely independent administrative units, are the county boroughs, which are all-purpose authorities—that is to say, one authority, the county borough council, does the work of both county and district councils for its own area. County boroughs are usually thought of as large towns. Usually they are, but by no means always. Many have under 100,000 people, and the smallest, Canterbury, had in 1939 only 26,000. There are 83 county boroughs.

London is in a special position. The London County Council is not quite like any other county council and the 28 metropolitan borough councils are not quite like municipal boroughs, while the City Corporation has a peculiar status all its own.

Particular services provided for an area wider than that of an elected council are sometimes entrusted to special authorities or joint boards appointed by those councils whose areas are covered by the service. Examples are joint water boards, joint sewerage boards, joint drainage boards and joint hospital boards.

These rather dull facts are enough to reveal a picture of great variety and even, it may be said, of great confusion. Why should Canterbury Borough Council have the same powers and responsibilities as Birmingham, while Willesden, with seven times as big a population as Canterbury, has to share duties with the Middlesex County Council?

The reasons are partly historical. When county boroughs were created they were intended to be the largest towns. There were only 10 proposed when the Local Government Bill, 1888, was first introduced. But as it passed through Parliament local pride was aroused, local interests got busy and the number jumped to 61. The others have been created since as a result of pressure from towns which wanted to go ahead untrammelled by the rural outlook of the parent county council. At the same time, towns that were large in 1888 have since been left behind in the growth of population but still remain county boroughs.*

Controversial Issues

Throughout the discussion of these problems there will constantly arise this question: what on balance is the best kind of authority to do the job or, if there are to be two authorities sharing it, how should the work be divided? The problem is in every case a difficult one, but it is aggravated by the very natural indignation it causes. Councillors nearly always think their council is doing a very good job, and any change which

* The new Local Government Boundary Commission is empowered to alter the status and areas of authorities in the light of the instructions and guidance given by the Minister of Health (S.R. & O. 1945, No. 1569, and Practice Notes, 1946, each H.M.S.O. 1d.)

is going to reduce its powers or, worse still, abolish it, rouses all their powers of resistance. This is understandable and excusable. It would be a poor look-out for local councils if their members were not keen on them and proud of what they were doing; but it has obvious dangers. Unless we can adjust our methods of government to the ever-changing needs of democratic socialist reconstruction the whole system may break down.

The question of reform is often posed as a choice between single all-purpose authorities and a two-tier system. Some people think that the latter alternative—with the services shared between two authorities, as in the present counties—leads to friction and delay. The argument runs as follows: it is difficult to make a logical allocation of powers between the two tiers. Citizens are confused because they find it difficult to understand which authority is responsible for what. Instead of having one local authority in which they can take an interest and which they can blame for any shortcomings in the services they use they find that it always seems to be the authority other than the one they are in touch with that is responsible. If they complain about schools to a borough councillor they are told it is a county council matter. If they complain about refuse collection to a county councillor they are referred to the borough council. This confusion does, it is suggested, lead to apathy and to a feeling that it is hopeless to try to get anything done. Would it not be simpler to have a single authority responsible for the whole range of services?

The difficulty is, of course, that this single authority would be too big and too remote. If it is to be big enough and have a large enough population for all services, it must on other grounds be too big an authority. Large authorities have many great advantages, but they have not gone without criticism. In the first place a large area means that the centre of administration is often a long way from the ordinary ratepayer. Not only do councillors have to make long journeys to attend meetings, but citizens who want to make complaints or obtain information have to travel a long way to do it. Equally, the councillor who wants to see for himself how the services for which he is responsible work has a wide area to cover. In the second place a large area means that there are a great many decisions to make. Agendas become very long and the work of the authority takes up a great deal of time. Long journeys, long meetings, and bundles of reports to read would all tend to cut off the ordinary man from membership—at least, as long as compensation is not given for loss of wages.

In the third place an authority which meets a long way away may cease to have a local appeal. The ordinary citizen may not feel it to be a body which will be very interested in his opinions or of which he has any chance of becoming a member if he wanted to. The result might be an intensification of that apathy and indifference which is so crippling a handicap to good local government.

The Need for Wider Areas

On the other hand, there is no doubt that present-day services demand bigger areas; and the present two-tier system has been criticised because often the top tier is not high enough. This can be illustrated by four examples from town and country planning, from public health, from technical education and from trading services.

(1) Town and country planning should be what it is called—the planning of town and country, balancing agricultural and urban land, built-up areas and open spaces, industrial districts and residential areas, city centres and suburban dormitories. This requires a large area or else the plan is incomplete. The big city council wants to safeguard open spaces in the countryside for the recreation of its citizens and to build housing estates there in which they can live, without the council losing all the benefits of the increased rateable values which result. It may want to disperse some of its overcrowded industries into surrounding areas.

(2) In a small area it is not possible to provide specialist hospitals with their own specialist equipment partly because small authorities cannot afford to pay for them and partly because not enough people will need the special facilities provided. A complete hospital service can only be provided for a large area, which is one of the reasons for the new system of hospital administration proposed in the Health Services Bill.

(3) Technical education calls for the provision of highly equipped technical institutes. A small area will not provide enough pupils to make it worth while running them; only a big authority can shoulder the financial burden and provide enough pupils.

(4) Council areas are not necessarily the proper ones for gas, electricity and passenger transport. The consensus of expert opinion is that larger areas are needed for electricity and gas distribution and for bus transport if the consumer is to get the best possible service.

There are plenty of other examples showing the need for large authorities, which is illustrated by the practice of transferring more and more functions to joint boards and committees and to the central government. Large authorities should be able to reduce overheads, employ a more qualified and competent staff and cover larger areas with greater efficiency.

A Possible Solution

The need for wider areas on the one hand and for preserving local interest on the other leads straight to the proposals made by the Labour Party* and other bodies for a new two-tier system. The major local authorities of the existing two-tier system would be enlarged into regional

* See "The Future of Local Government" for a detailed examination of the question.

authorities, and the others might be known as area authorities. The regional authorities would plan for the whole region (which would be smaller than the war-time Civil Defence Region) and carry out major schemes, leaving in many cases details of administration and local services to the area authorities.

While fully aware that efficient and economic planning and equitable distribution of costs calls for larger units of local government, the Labour Party is concerned that they should not be so large that the sense of common interest in its government is lost, and that they should be democratic in constitution and under the effective control of elected representatives. In the same way the lower tier, the area authority, must be left with sufficient real power and interesting work to attract the right type of people to its membership and to be the hub of local interest in public affairs.

Points for Discussion

How best can the need for planned and co-ordinated social services be reconciled with genuine local participation in administration? Should new county boroughs be created and old ones extended so as to provide a network of all-purpose authorities, or should the two-tier system be developed into regionalism? In your area, is the local council worth preserving or has it failed to do its job? Could you make it work or is there something fundamentally wrong with the whole set-up?

II. WHAT LIMITS A LOCAL AUTHORITY'S POWERS ?

We have been discussing in general the very wide question of what is the best sort of local authority to have. The final answer must obviously depend on what it is expected to do. If it is true (and it is a big "if") that much of the work that councils have done in the past can now best be done by the central government or new forms of regional organisation, there may, nevertheless, be new work waiting at hand which they have never tried before. If the local council is losing some of its functions, can it look for another job?

A council which wants to start on some new work may find itself in great difficulty. A local authority can do nothing for which it has no powers given to it by Parliament, and if it tries to get round the limits on its powers it may get into serious trouble either through the District Auditor or by the intervention of the Courts. There are nearly always people anxious to obstruct municipal work if it goes outside what they regard as its proper field, and they will not hesitate to take what legal remedies lie open to them.

Local councils derive their authority solely from Parliament. There are a number of different ways in which these powers can be given. Parliament may pass a General Act, like the Public Health Act, 1936, the Housing Act, 1936, and the Education Act, 1944. These Acts direct authorities to do certain things and permit them to do other things if they want to. For example, an urban district council has a duty to frame proposals to meet the needs of its area for housing accommodation for the working classes; it may, but need not, provide community centres on its estates. Parliament may also pass an Adoptive Act, which allows the authorities to exercise specific powers if they go through the special legal procedure of adopting the Act. This is the position with public libraries. Then a General Act may allow the authorities to assume new powers after they have obtained a Departmental Order from the Ministry concerned or after they have obtained a Provisional or Special Order from Parliament. Finally, authorities may go direct to Parliament to obtain special sanction by securing the passage of a Local or Private Act through Parliament. A further complication is that different kinds of authority have different powers, so that one council may be prevented from doing something because it is the responsibility of another type of council covering the area.

Thus it follows that if a local authority feels that it could advantageously take over certain services or start new ones it must first of all see what powers it has. If it finds that it has not the power it must either start an agitation to persuade Parliament to pass a General Act to cover the whole country or sponsor a Local Bill to give it special powers. Local Act procedure is tedious and costly and may very likely end in failure. A proposal which is novel may be rejected on the grounds that it should be dealt with by national legislation or because of the hostility of other interested parties.

The Labour Party has from time to time introduced Bills into Parliament to enable local authorities to do anything that a limited company can do, but these Bills have never got very far. They were introduced to encourage enterprise and experiment and reduce the hampering fear of trouble with the District Auditor. The argument against them is that authorities might launch out into extravagant developments which might end in costly failure at the expense of the ratepayer. The need for some control over individual enterprise as a part of a national plan is becoming more and more appreciated in the Party. With a Socialist Government in power which is planning the industrial and economic life of the nation, it may not now be desirable to introduce a general Enabling Bill to give a wide range of optional powers to local authorities with varying resources and degrees of energy. Rather should emphasis be laid on the need for duties being made obligatory upon local authorities at a given minimum standard of service.

Legal restraints are not the only obstacles to local authority initiative. Even when the powers exist, a council often finds that it is prevented from

using them because of financial difficulties. Councils are usually reluctant to start on any new service unless they can be sure of getting some assistance financially from the Central Government. If a service is to "rank for grant" from the Government it must first of all obtain the approval of the appropriate Government Department. This need is an effective check on local originality.

Points for Discussion

What is the best way of allowing local authorities freedom to develop experimental services without putting crippling burdens on the ratepayer or causing serious dislocation of the planned policy of the Central Government? Are there new fields into which councils should penetrate? Who should decide what these fields are?

III. WHO PAYS FOR IT ?

Some municipal expenditure pays for itself. Public utility services aim at charging the consumer at least the cost of the service provided, and many authorities make a profit. In the case of many other services, some charge is made, though it may be very much below the cost of providing them. In all, just over one-third of local government income comes from trading receipts, rents of houses, fees, tolls and fines. The rest is divided between grants from the Central Government and the receipts from rates.

In the past, the majority of grants-in-aid were paid as a percentage of total expenditure on a number of specified services. After the last war, when local expenditure was rising rapidly, these percentage grants became the subject of bitter political controversy. Socialists liked them because, where the proportion of expenditure paid in grants was high, they encouraged local authorities to develop essential services. Tories disliked them for broadly the same reasons. The Local Government Act of 1929 abolished percentage grants for nearly all but the education, police and highways services, and a block grant of almost invariable amount was substituted. This grant now accounts for one-third of total income from grants.

Weighted Formula

This new grant was employed to experiment with distribution according to need. A formula was devised, based on rateable value, numbers of unemployed, road mileage in relation to size of population, numbers of children under five, which "weighted" the population of each county and county borough according to these factors. An increasing amount of the block grant was to be paid out on the basis of "weighted population," but not until 1947 was it expected that the *whole* grant would be distributed in this way. The application of the grant has not had as marked an effect on the rates as was anticipated, though since 1937, when the formula

was somewhat improved, the prospects have been much better. The Labour Government has now arranged to pay to authorities a supplement to the block grant allocated on a formula which gives rather more attention to need.

The Central Government has not been able to get away altogether from percentage grants. Not only did the 1929 Act leave untouched some very notable instances, but in other cases where an urgent need was felt to encourage councils to develop particular services the percentage grant was used. A recent example has been road safety, where approved expenditure receives 50 per cent. from the Ministry of Transport. The war emergency made it necessary to introduce the 100 per cent. grant of reimbursement for certain services which the local authorities administered on behalf of the Government. War-time day nurseries were one example of this where the percentage has since been dropped to about 50. Where emergency housing accommodation is provided by requisitioning, the 100 per cent. grant still continues.


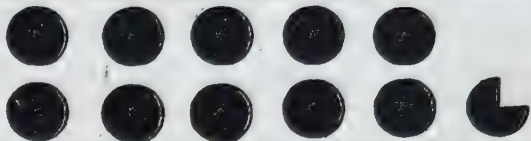










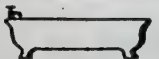

















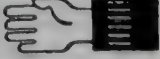









A third type of grant is the unit grant which does not vary with the cost of a service but with the amount provided. This is used for housing, a fixed sum being paid by the Central Government for every house built.

Local Rates

The balance of local authority expenditure, about one-third of the whole, falls on the rates. A rate is a local tax of so many shillings in the pound based on the rateable value of all occupied property. Agricultural land and buildings (other than dwelling-houses) are totally exempt from rates and the property of industrial and some transport undertakings only pay one-quarter of the full amount. The rateable value of property is determined by valuation and is based on what is regarded as fair rent for it.

Rates vary widely from place to place. In 1944-45 the ratepayer in the county borough of Bournemouth paid 8s. in the £, while in West Ham he paid 21s. 6d., in the municipal borough of Worthing he paid 8s. 4d., in Port Talbot 19s. 4d. There seems to be some unfairness about this which wants looking into, and it is natural to ask the cause. Is it in the first place due to profligate "socialist" expenditure? It is true that a very much higher proportion of boroughs with high rates will be found to have Labour majorities than of boroughs with lower rates. It is true that Bournemouth and Worthing were not Labour boroughs and West Ham and Port Talbot were. It is also true, no doubt, that Labour councils will try to develop social services more than non-Labour councils—which is bound to mean increased expenditure. There is, however, a great deal more to be said than that. It is entirely misleading to compare the expenditure of councils by comparing the amount in the pound paid in rates, or the rate poundage as it is called. A much better index is the product of the penny rate—that is, the amount of money which will be

TOTAL WEEKLY COST PER HEAD OF ALL LOCAL GOVERNMENT SERVICES

| | | |
|----------------------|---|--|
| EDUCATION |  |  |
| LIBRARIES |  |  |
| HOSPITALS |  |  |
| MOTHERS AND CHILDREN |  |  |
| SEWERAGE |  |  |
| REFUSE |  |  |
| BATHS |  |  |
| PARKS |  |  |
| BLIND WELFARE |  |  |
| POOR RELIEF |  |  |
| MENTAL HOSPITALS |  |  |
| HOUSING AND PLANNING |  |  |
| ROADS |  |  |
| STREET LIGHTING |  |  |
| FIRE BRIGADES |  |  |
| POLICE |  |  |
| JUSTICE |  |  |
| CIVIL DEFENCE |  |  |
| MISCELLANEOUS |  |  |
| ADMINISTRATION |  |  |

NOTE: EACH SYMBOL REPRESENTS ONE PENNY AND EACH SEGMENT EITHER 3D., 1D. OR 1D.

collected for every penny of rate poundage. These figures at once give a clue to the wide differences which have been mentioned. In Bournemouth every penny in the pound of rates yields £7,600, in West Ham it only yields £4,750, in Worthing £3,500, while in Port Talbot only £654. This means that in order to spend the same amount of money very different rates have to be levied. For every £10,000 of rate expenditure Bournemouth would have to levy just over 1½d., West Ham just over 2d., Worthing just over 2½d. and Port Talbot 1s. 7d.

Here is one reason why Bournemouth rates are less than West Ham and why Port Talbot, however modest its needs, is bound to have heavy rates. But it does not explain why the rates in West Ham should be more than Worthing. The differences in the product of the penny rate show how towns have very different rateable values on which the rates are levied; they may also have different populations, so that a fairer test even than the product of the penny rate is the rateable value per head of the population. For a town with a large population will obviously have to spend more in comparison—there will be more people wanting to use the schools, the hospitals and the other social services.

Worthing has a rateable value per head of £17 18s. od., while West Ham's is little more than half at £9 17s. 4d. Bournemouth is not quite so well off as Worthing with £15 18s. od., while Port Talbot has only £4 13s. 2d.

These variations are wide enough, but they assume that rateable value means the same thing in Bournemouth as it does in Port Talbot or that the basis of valuation of property is the same though the actual value may be different. This assumption cannot be accepted. A recent statistical investigation led to the conclusion that many areas undervalue their property; with some exceptions "there is a clear tendency for levels of assessment to diminish with increasing wealth."* The poorer areas tend to push up their valuation, and the same rate per £ is therefore a relatively heavier burden on the ratepayer.

An Unfair Tax

There is no doubt about the uneven incidence of rates as a form of taxation. The proportion of family income spent on rent increases in the lower income groups. As rates are closely linked to rent, this means that the burden of rates falls more heavily on poorer people. It falls more heavily also on people with large families, who need large houses for them. As between different businesses it discriminates against the trader who needs plenty of room to display his goods and therefore must have a larger shop. In normal times there is a steady move away from taxation on

* *The Problem of Valuation for Rating.* Hicks and Leser. Cambridge University Press. 7s. 6d.

necessities like tea and sugar, yet a tax is maintained on housing, which is even more of a necessity.

There is another feature of English rating which is not essential to a rating system and has been subjected to a good deal of criticism. English rating is a tax on the *occupation* of property, so that empty property is exempt from rates. To some extent this is justified. There is no one living in an empty house to take advantage of some of the services on which rates are spent—no one to go to school or to be ill, no refuse to be collected. On the other hand, an empty house has to be watched by the police. The roads have still to be kept in repair and the sewers flushed. If the councils stopped performing these services the chances of letting the house would be seriously reduced, so that it would be equitable for the landlord to make some contribution towards them. Moreover, the rating of empty property would discourage landlords from keeping property empty in the hope of getting a higher rent eventually or in order to maintain the rents of other houses rather than admit poorer tenants into the neighbourhood. In Scotland, rates are apportioned between owners and occupiers, only the owners' share being paid on empty premises. In the City of London a small part of the total rates is payable on empties. In 1936 the Labour London County Council promoted a Bill to make empty properties liable to rates, but it was defeated in the Conservative House of Commons.

The present rating system might be improved by having valuation carried out nationally or regionally instead of by each local valuation authority. In this way some, but by no means all, of the variations in rates would be removed. The attitude to this proposal for central valuation depends very largely upon whether people believe that valuation is a science which can be standardised on centrally-administered rules or whether they believe that it is a matter where knowledge of local conditions is essential for equitable treatment and where, accordingly, local representatives are in the best position to see that fair play is given to the ratepayer.

Local Income Tax?

A local income tax would be a more drastic reform which, in theory at least, would have great advantages. How would it work? The particular local authority would budget its own ordinary expenditure in the ordinary way, consider what were the total taxable incomes it could draw upon and settle the appropriate rate of tax, say 6d. in the £. The tax would then be levied in the same way as national income tax, possibly being collected through P.A.Y.E. by adjustment of code numbers, which would change as a taxpayer moved from one district to another. The effect would be that rents would fall by the amount of the rates while income tax rose, and the advantage that poorer people would have to pay a relatively smaller proportion of their income in income tax (which is a fair tax related to

capacity to pay) than they have had to pay in rates. But there are several drawbacks. The first difficulty is that a local income tax would be useless in some poor districts containing hardly anyone liable to income tax. Poplar or Merthyr Tydfil would, for instance, have raised practically nothing in local income taxes before the war. The income tax would therefore have to be regional in scope and thus presupposes the existence of regional authorities. A second difficulty would be in deciding what income a local authority would be allowed to tax. If the test was residence, there would be a tendency to drive out income tax payers from highly taxed areas. The watering places of the Sussex coast might play the same part as lower-tax refuges for the rich that the Channel Islands have played in relation to national taxation. Councils in some business and industrial districts would also find themselves with few residents to tax, although they might perhaps be able to tax the profits of the undertakings at which the people work, while the creation of regional councils would mean that more people both lived and worked within the area of one authority. If, on the other hand, the test was where the money was earned, it would have most complicated results. Dormitory areas might find themselves denuded of taxable income, while dividends from large companies would be almost impossible to apportion between different factories. In either event, the administrative complications would be formidable and the loopholes for evasion numerous.

The difficulties of the alternatives show the real strength of the rate as a local tax. People can flee from highly taxed areas, but they cannot take their houses with them, nor can they conceal the fact that the house is there. Evasion is not easy, and income from property is, on the whole, fairly steady. Though the burden may be heavy, nevertheless the income is there and the poorest authority has got something to collect.

Some of the anomalies of rating could be removed if rates were based on a wider area which embraced more varied types of property. If the area charged with paying for the social services of a poor district was large enough to include prosperous suburbs, the burden would be more evenly spread. This is, on this ground alone, a strong argument for the larger authority.

A more drastic method of reform would be to abandon local taxation altogether and rely entirely on grants from the Central Government. While there is room for reimbursement of a bigger share of local expenditure out of central funds, any general move towards the 100 per cent. grant will be very treacherous ground for local authorities. In the long run the tune will be called by the authority which pays the piper, and if councils wish to preserve any independence they must be prepared to shoulder a substantial part of the financial burden. This applies as between area and regional authorities as well as between local and central.

Points for Discussion

What reforms would you suggest to level out local inequalities in the rating system? To what extent would the rating of unoccupied property, and other property now de-rated, help in local problems? Would you replace rates by other forms of local tax, such as a local income tax? What are the arguments for the retention of some kind of local tax?

IV. HOW COUNCILLORS ARE CHOSEN

Local government is not just a question of machinery. Unless there are the right people to work it, a council is bound to be a failure. And failures in local government are disastrous, disastrous not only to the unfortunate people who suffer from their incompetent or corrupt administration but to the whole idea of Democracy. If we cannot succeed in choosing good people to run local government we are showing that we are not fit for self-government.

Candidates for councils are nominated by electors and voted for at local elections. In the case of boroughs (except in London), one-third are elected each year; in the case of counties, all are elected every three years; with district councils the practice varies. Anybody qualified to vote for a council can (with certain disqualifications) stand for election to it.* In some areas it is still possible for individuals to get themselves elected without any organisation behind them just by finding a few friends to help them. In rural authorities of all kinds this is common; it is much less usual in urban areas. Where there is a large electorate the labour of addressing and delivering election addresses to all the electorate is alone more than most individuals can manage without an organisation behind them.

The Labour Party has never tried to hide its belief in the value of Party organisation in local government. It has always regarded activity in local councils as only one side of a general advance towards socialism, in which local and national Parties must co-operate together. It has also observed that the working of independent representation has been to exclude working class people from councils because they lack the financial resources to stand for election. Wherever there is a Labour Group on a council there is therefore at least one section which is working as a party. Every county borough and very many non-county boroughs and districts now have a Labour Group. Fifty-nine county boroughs still have Independents; some of these no doubt are genuine Independents who work and vote as individuals, but others use the title merely as a cloak for anti-Labour combinations. It is significant that in 17 of these 59 councils there are no "Conservatives."

The Labour Party has made an incomparable contribution to vigorous and democratic local government and has demonstrated the advantages

* See *Conduct of Local Elections*, 1946. Labour Party. 1s.

of the Party system. No other satisfactory method has been devised for returning ordinary wage-earners in large numbers to elected bodies. The team-work of a party enables councillors to specialise and men and women of differing education and experience to pool their ideas in working out a common policy. It makes for clean administration because every councillor knows his own reputation will be affected by misconduct by other members of his party. It makes for consistency in policy.

Once a plan is accepted by the majority party it can be carried out steadily over the months without being varied merely because there is a change in the attendance at a particular council meeting. Nor will it be held up by the mutual jealousies of rival committees.

Choosing Candidates

Little has been said about the way candidates for councils are chosen. The procedure in the Labour Party is laid down in detail in the model rules, which are available for anyone to read. Though the letter of the constitution may be kept, it does not follow that the most suitable people are chosen. Only the good sense and sometimes the moral courage of the local parties can ensure that. Nor is it possible to lay down any hard-and-fast rules other than that those chosen should be honest and good Socialists. The ideal is to have a well-balanced team—some youth, but also some maturity; some “average” men and women, but also some with special qualifications and experience to offer. The job of councillor is quite different from that of a chief officer, and it would be wrong to look exclusively for the same kind of experience and qualifications. On the other hand, unless some councillors have specialist knowledge or high administrative gifts, and unless all have a grasp of local government and can express themselves coherently, the team will not maintain the high reputation which the Labour Party possesses in local government. Some parties insist on all candidates attending a course of lectures on local government as a condition of endorsement. It has sometimes been suggested that a further step should be taken and a qualifying examination be instituted. It is argued that if it was necessary to take an examination to be a Party Agent or a test to be a C.D. warden it is equally desirable to take one as a preliminary to being a councillor. This is open to the strong objection that it might exclude some of the experienced, wise and shrewd working class men and women who lacked the purely academic training to take an examination in their stride.

Many people, however well qualified to serve as councillors, may not be available because of lack of time or financial means. Much depends on the time a candidate can give to the work and whether municipal work will clash with his job. The widespread habit of holding council meetings in the daytime means that the working man who becomes a councillor may have to lose all or part of a day's pay, which he cannot reclaim from public funds. This may well prevent his standing for election.

One way out of this difficulty is to have evening meetings wherever the council does not cover such a large area that some councillors have to travel long distances to the meetings. This means late work for staff and the transaction of important public business when people are tired after a day's work. Nor does it meet the difficulty of the shift worker. On the other hand, it enables the public to attend and helps to keep their interest active.

The only other possible solution seems to be payment of members for time lost at work. This has been tried in Scotland and has been proposed in England and Wales by a number of enlightened authorities.

Points for Discussion

Is it desirable to keep "party" out of local affairs? What are the disadvantages of one-party councils? What should be the practice of a Labour Group in the appointment of aldermen and chairmen? What are the qualities to look for when choosing candidates for local elections?

Do you agree that members of local councils should be reimbursed for time lost at work? If so, how would you calculate compensation?

V. HOW THEY ARE ELECTED

There is no need to say very much in this pamphlet about local elections. Anyone who has been a member of the Party for some time has had plenty of experience of them, and there are other Labour Party publications dealing fully with the subject.

Since 1944 the electorate for local authorities has been identical with the electorate for Parliament. All adults over 21 are entitled to vote, with the usual reservations about lunatics and criminals, but they must vote, of course, in the constituency or ward where they are registered. In the case of the business vote, no one gets it automatically. Two conditions must be fulfilled by anyone wanting to have a business vote. First, he must apply for the vote and, second, he must apply before the local register is completed.

The county boroughs have only one set of elections. In the counties there are, of course, at least two entirely different sets, one for county councils and one for borough or district councils. People who live in rural districts can also vote at parish meetings or in the election of parish councils.

Apathy

But there are far too few people who actually exercise their right to vote at local elections. In Parliamentary elections about three-quarters of the electorate vote. For county boroughs the percentage is usually less than 50, and in other local elections the poll is commonly much lower. Polls in rural areas have, until recently at any rate, been specially low; one cause

Labour Parties can do even more to remove by seeing that more polling stations are established in the small villages, whose inhabitants have often had to walk several miles to vote. In is, unfortunately, no rare thing for a seat on a rural council to go entirely uncontested. County councils are the worst offenders on this score. Thus, to take the one example of Hampshire County Council, only 8 out of 68 seats were contested in 1937, and although there was a great improvement here, as elsewhere, in 1946, there were still only 37 seats contested.

What are the reasons for public apathy in local government? In the first place the man in the street knows that a change in national government may make a decided difference to his everyday life, but he finds it hard to believe that the same is true of changes in local government. Then there is lack of publicity. General Elections for the House of Commons involve spectacular issues of national importance and are widely publicised in the daily Press. Local elections may only involve issues of local interest, which do not qualify for generous display in newspapers, which aim to appeal to the country as a whole. As for local papers, they normally appear only once a week, are not read so widely, and too often lack the punch and presentation which give the nationals their grip on the public.

Again, publicity deliberately sponsored by the different parties is closely restricted by financial resources. Few candidates or parties can put money aside for large-scale publicity. When you know little or nothing about a candidate it is hard enough to bring yourself to vote, quite apart from showing any enthusiasm.

The apathy at elections is a reflection of a wide indifference to what goes on in councils, an indifference which is not only a deadly enemy of enlightened progress but also an encouragement to corruption.

Stimulating Interest

Many councils, including a high proportion of Labour councils, have given careful attention to ways and means of "getting themselves across." The problem is complicated, but two proposals can be made. First, there should be a regular reporting back to ward committees and to constituents. Second, all public authorities should attempt to reach a far wider audience by printing reports and pamphlets on their work and distributing them to the public. Third, and still more important, the public relations policy of any local authority should not be concerned with the one-way channel from the council to the public. It should also attempt to bring the public's point of view back into the council chamber.

A recent Report* shows where the present public relations work of local authorities can be improved. The Report shows how personal

* "Relations Between Local Government and the Community." 6d. From N.A.L.G.O., 24, Abingdon Street, London, S.W.1.

contacts, schools, youth organisations, the Press, publications, meetings, celebrations, films, and information bureaux can all be used to facilitate a progressive policy.

Increasing numbers of councils are beginning to develop a systematic public relations policy, with a special committee and a full-time officer responsible. In this field of local government there is plenty of room for experiment and new ideas.

Points for Discussion

Is the existing structure of local government—for example, in rural areas a three-tier system—itself one of the causes of ignorance and confusion? Could elections be timed to avoid this? What can be done to induce people to vote? Is there lack of interest in the work of your council? Is this the fault of the electorate or of the Council?

SHORT READING LIST

- Local Government Handbook, 1946. Labour Party. 1s. 3d.
The Future of Local Government. Labour Party, 1943. 2d.
The Development of Local Government. By W. A. Robson. Allen and Unwin, 1932. 12s. 6d.
A Century of Municipal Progress. Ed. H. J. Laski. Allen and Unwin, 1936. 21s.
The Pilot Guide to Political London. By E. C. R. Hadfield and J. E. MacColl. Pilot Press, 1945. 7s. 6d.
The Reform of Local Government Finance. By A. N. Silver. Lawrence and Wishart, 1945. 2s.
The ABC of Local Government. By C. Kent Wright. Evans, 1946. 5s.
Local Government in England and Wales. By W. E. Jackson. Penguin Books, 1945. 9d.

(And see Reading List in Local Government Handbook, 1946.)

May, 1946.

LABOUR DISCUSSION SERIES

These pamphlets, mostly dealing with the policies and problems of the Labour Government, are intended primarily for discussion. For some hints on how to make use of them, see "Do's and Don'ts for a Labour Discussion Group," price 2d., from the Labour Party. Although issued by the Research Department of the Labour Party with the help of individual members, the Labour Party does not necessarily accept responsibility for all the views contained in the pamphlets.

Already published :

- 1 THE RISE OF THE LABOUR PARTY**
- 2 FAIR SHARES OF SCARCE GOODS**
- 3 THE BANK OF ENGLAND & THE NATION**
- 5 REPEAL OF THE TRADE DISPUTES ACT**

Obtainable from : LABOUR PUBLICATIONS DEPARTMENT,
TRANSPORT HOUSE,
SMITH SQUARE, LONDON, S.W.1

*At the following
prices :*

| | | | | | |
|--------------|---|---|---|-----------|----------|
| 1 copy : 2d. | . | . | . | post free | 3d. |
| 12 copies | . | . | . | post free | 1s. 6d. |
| 100 copies | . | . | . | post free | 10s. 0d. |

The Labour Party is ready to accept standing orders for further pamphlets to be published in this series